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Pattern of conferences

Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In its resolutions 50/206 A of 23 December 1995 and 51/211 A of 18 December 1996, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to provide, within the resources approved for conference services in the bienniums 1996–1997 and 1998–1999, interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States upon request by those groupings, taking into account the priority due to meetings included in the calendar of conferences and meetings, and to submit a report on the implementation of those decisions to the General Assembly, respectively, at its fifty-first and fifty-second sessions through the Committee on Conferences. The Committee fulfilled its reporting requirement through its annual reports to the Assembly.

2. Moreover, in section A, paragraph 9, of its resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997, the General Assembly decided to include all necessary resources in the budget for the biennium 1998–1999 to provide interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States upon request by those groupings, on an ad hoc basis, in accordance with established practice, and requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its fifty-third session, through the Committee on Conferences, a report on the implementation of that decision. At its 411th meeting, on 3 September 1998, the Committee considered an oral report on the matter covering the period from January 1998 through end-June 1998 for meetings of this nature at Geneva, and for the period from end-June 1997 to end-June 1998 for similar meetings at New York.

3. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraphs 30 and 31 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, and, as decided, includes the period covered in the oral report as well as updated information from July 1998 to January 1999. The report on the implementation of the decision in paragraph 28 of the same resolution

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will contain statistics of such meetings from February 1999 onwards and will be submitted to the Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences.

4. The General Assembly has mandated the Secretariat to make provision in its requests for resources for the servicing of such groups, while at the same time maintaining its decision that services should be provided on an as available basis, that is, without any servicing capacity being specifically allocated for that purpose.

5. The manner in which the Secretariat has addressed these mandates has derived from the actual practice of calendar bodies. Every biennium, several hundred meetings are planned for in its capacity requirements and eventually scheduled. Cancellations of calendar body meetings bring down the number of meetings actually held, thus freeing capacity to service regional and other major groupings.

II. Data

6. For the six-month period from January through the end of June 1998, all but one of the 29 requests for the provision of conference services to regional and other major groupings were met at Geneva, for a total of 97 per cent. For the period from July 1998 through January 1999, all of the 15 requests for facilities and services were met.

7. With regard to New York, during the period from end-June 1997 to end-June 1998, 100 per cent of the 535 requests for facilities only were met. As to the provision of interpretation services, 283 out of 348 requests were met, or a total of 81 per cent. As in the past, services were not provided largely because of the unavailability of interpretation teams. A case in point is the week of 22 to 26 June 1998, when five of the six requests for services for regional groups could not be granted. Two factors account for the high percentage of refusals during that period. First, few meetings were cancelled; secondly, the Committee for Programme and Coordination requested six additional meetings. As a result, 11 intergovernmental bodies in addition to the five regional groups in question could not be serviced.

8. During the period from July 1998 to January 1999, 100 per cent of the 399 requests for facilities only were met. As to the provision of interpretation services, 151 out of 169 requests were met, or 89 per cent. A significant week during this period was 21 to 25 September 1998, when only three requests for interpretation services could not be granted of a total of 26. The Group of 77 and China had 10 meetings that week, out of which seven were provided with interpretation services. Another period in question is the week of 2 to 6 November 1998, when four out of five requests for interpretation services were not granted. This was a peak period during the main part of the General Assembly session, when 78 meetings with interpretation were serviced.

9. A comparative table of statistics for the three reporting periods follows:

	Interpretation services			*Conference facilities*	
	Requested	*Provided*	*Not provided*	*Requested*	*Provided*
July 1996–June 1997	125	85	40	408	407
July 1997–June 1998	348	283	65	535	535
July 1998–January 1999	169	151	18	399	399

10. Noting the importance of providing services and facilities to regional and other major groupings of Member States, the Secretaries of intergovernmental bodies have been increasingly responsive about advising the Planning and Meetings Servicing Section of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services in advance of cancellations, thus making it possible to reassign services and to take the information into account when planning the weekly schedule. This is largely due to the emphasis placed at the active dialogue sessions on the necessity to keep conference services informed as early as possible of cancellations. The Planning and Meetings Servicing Section has, whenever possible, suggested alternate dates on which it seemed more likely that services would be available. At Headquarters, the possibility of providing conference services to regional and other major groupings of Member States depends clearly on available capacity, which is a reflection of meeting activity on the part of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and other bodies that are entitled to receive such services on a priority basis.